

Frequently Asked Questions about Boiling Water for Emergency Disinfection of Drinking Water



Why was I advised to boil my tap water?

You may be asked to boil your tap water during an emergency

- if tests show that harmful microorganisms could be present in the water,
- if the water pressure drops due to equipment failure or power outages,
- because of water main breaks or repairs,
- if the water source has been flooded, or
- during other situations that warrant special action to protect consumers' health.

How does boiling make my tap water safe?

Boiling the water kills microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses, or protozoans that can cause disease. Boiling makes the tap water microbiologically safe.

How long should I boil the water?

Bring tap water to a full rolling boil, let it boil for one minute, and let it cool before using.

Important Safety Tips

When boiling water on the stovetop, use manageable-sized containers and do not overfill them. Place the container on a rear burner if there are small children in the house. Let the water cool before transferring to another container.

Can I boil water in the microwave?

Tap water can be boiled in the microwave in a microwave-safe container, provided that the water reaches a full rolling boil for one minute. Place a microwave-safe utensil in the container to keep the water from superheating (heating above the boiling point without forming steam or bubbles).

Do I have to boil the tap water used to make beverages?

Yes. Boil all of the tap water you use for making coffee, tea, mixed drinks, Kool-Aid or any beverage made with water. In addition, all tap water used for making ice for consumption must be boiled.

Should I boil the tap water used to make baby formula?

Yes. Only use boiled tap water or bottled water for mixing formula for your baby.

Do I need to boil water before using it to wash vegetables that will be eaten raw?

Yes. Boil all of the tap water you use for washing raw vegetables.

Should I boil the tap water used in cooking?

All tap water used in cooking must first be boiled for one minute, unless the cooking process involves boiling for one minute or more.

Do I have to boil my dish-washing water?

No. Adding a tablespoon of household bleach such as Clorox to a sink full of tap water should be sufficient to treat the water used for washing dishes. Bleach should also be added to the water used for rinsing dishes. Allow dishes and utensils to air dry before reuse.

You may wash dishes in an electric dishwasher, but be sure to use it with its heating elements turned on. After washing in an electric dishwasher, dishes should be rinsed in water with a tablespoon of bleach added, and allowed to air dry before reuse.

Should I boil tap water for brushing my teeth?

Yes. Any tap water that might be swallowed should be boiled before use.

Is it necessary to boil water to be used for hand washing? Is any special soap necessary?

No. It is not necessary to boil the tap water used for washing hands, and no special soaps are necessary.

What about my bath water?

There is no need to boil water for bathing or showering. Adults, teens, and older children, can shower or bathe, though they should avoid getting water in the mouth or swallowing the water. Infants and toddlers should be sponge bathed. No special soaps are necessary.

Care should be taken to prevent water from getting into deep open or post-surgical wounds. Consult your physician or health care provider for wound care instructions.

Do I need to use boiled water for washing clothes or flushing the toilet?

No.

Do I still have to boil tap water if I have a water treatment device?

Yes. Devices designed to improve the taste, odor, or chemical quality of the water, such as activated carbon filters, will not remove harmful microorganisms from the tap water. Boil the tap water to make sure it is safe.

Can I use bottled water instead of boiling tap water?

Yes. Bottled water can be used for all of the situations where boiled tap water is recommended above. Be sure that the bottled water is from a reliable source.

Can I haul water from my neighbor's well or spring for drinking purposes?

No. You should only use water from an approved, tested source. Without routinely testing the water there is no way to know if the water is safe to drink.

Should I boil the tap water I give to my animals or pets?

You can boil the tap water you give to the animals in your care. Your veterinarian can tell you if this precaution is necessary.

What should I do if I become sick?

See your family physician or healthcare provider. Your doctor may call the Virginia Department of Health Office of Drinking Water at (804) 864 7500 for information about the boil water notice. Your doctor should notify the local health department if he or she suspects your illness was caused by microorganisms in the water.

Some people may be more vulnerable to contaminants. People with weakened immune systems, such as people with cancer undergoing chemotherapy, organ transplant patients, people with HIV/AIDS or other immune system disorders, some elderly, and infants can be at greater risk from infections. These people should seek advice about drinking water from their health care providers. Guidelines on ways to reduce the risk of infection from microbiological contaminants are available from the Safe Drinking Water Hotline (800-426-4791).

How will I know when it is safe to drink my tap water?

You will be notified when tests show that the tap water is safe to drink. You may be asked to run water to flush the pipes in your home before using your tap water or be given other special instructions. Until you are notified, continue to boil all tap water for one minute before use.

If you cannot boil your tap water because of a power outage...

In an emergency, boiling is the preferred method for making sure tap water is safe to drink. The following are acceptable alternatives if you cannot boil your tap water because of a power outage or loss of gas service:

- Use bottled water.
- Use liquid household bleach to disinfect tap water. The bleach product should be recently purchased, free of additives and scents, and should contain a hypochlorite solution of at least 5.25%. If the water is clear, add 8 drops of bleach (about ¼ teaspoon) to each gallon of water. Add twice the amount of bleach (16 drops, or ½ teaspoon) to each gallon if the water is cloudy. After adding bleach, the water should be stirred and allowed to stand for at least 30 minutes before use.
- Water purification tablets may also be used to disinfect tap water by following the manufacturer's instructions.